

[Marine Radio Operators]

Beliefs & Customs - Folk Stuff 16

FOLKLORE

NEW YORK

FORM C Text of Interview (Unedited)

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May Swenson

ADDRESS 29 1/2 Morton Street, N.Y.C.

DATE March 27, 1939

SUBJECT Marine Radio Operators JOHN WINOCUR:

(Short, wiry fellow, about 35. Stiff blond hair, keen blue eyes. Rather swaggering manner. Speaks with English intonation.)

Listen, I got some corks for you. Guys came to me for stories. Writers. There was a chap used a story of mine. He wrote it up — it was my story alright — but you wouldn't have recognized it. Listen, here's something really happened. Funny. I was on a freight bound for Rio and Buenos Aires. It's a long hop, and the radio transmitter covers only part of the distance. Same of the messages, we had to relay. Well, I get a message, one word was

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all it was. It took about three hours for the other operator, who was pretty far South down toward Rio, to pick it up. This message was one word: "Waiting," signed some gal's name.

Two, three days, and the answer came through. I threw the letter back on the same relay chain. It was just one word "Coming," signed Charlie. Funny people.

I remember a better one. Threw a message, says:

Arriving 7 p.m. Please bring overcoat 73(*)

Comes the message back, like this:

Metting ship Why overcoat? You'll have me to keep you warm 88(*)

88-Love And Kisses

(**)73-Best Regards

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Can you picture an intimacy between two men who have never seen each other? I knew a chap, knew him intimately — everything about him, down to the brand of cigarettes he used. I never met him. He was an operator on a tanker down around Dutch Guina. We corresponded regularly for months by radio. Became buddies. Somehow we never ran together in one port. But I know him better than the chaps I see every day. He sent me some beautiful letters. It just happened he struck oil with me. We discovered we had the same tastes in everything. He even used some of my own expressions. Where another chap would reply, "Yeah," or "You're telling me"—this fellow would write "Quite" or "Oh really", or "You don't say." He was well read, and interested in Psychology — I was too at that time. The ship would be riding smooth, it would be night, dark water. I'd stick my head in the port hole and see a star way out there — I'd think, his ship's as far out away from mine as that star. Sentimental maybe — you get that way — the sea is lonely — any seamen will tell you the same. I used to think, I've never seen him — maybe I'll never see

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him — yet I know him like I know myself. We corresponded every day. I still have some of his letters. You know, funny thing, I always used to picture him as looking like me. Don't know why — except it seemed we even thought alike.

This chap loaned me same money once. We had been beached for two weeks, and whe we pulled out again, I was flat. He wired me a large su. I decided when next I got on the beach again, I'd look him up — he was to visit his family that summer — I figured I'd meet him and return the money. I looked forward to it, and yet, in a way, I was prepared to have my illusions shot. You build up a dream — you picture it your own way — and the real 3 thing usually falls short. Well, anyway, the ship made port and no sooner I was on land, I sent the chap a letter — to his home. I waited a week, didn't hear from him. Then the letter came back marked non-delivery. On the stamp they check the reason why not delivered. There was a check in the column where it says 'Deceased'. I continued out to his home. I met his family. I met the girl he was going to marry. I had only ten days to make ship, but I laid off, stayed ashore, and missed the boat. When I shipped out again, it was on another vessel, a food ship, the [Granada?] — she laid up in Mobile and discharged at Portland, Maine.

Biggest binge I was ever on, lasted three months. Three months to the day, I'm not fooling. It was while I was with the [Granada?]. This time she hawled in at New Awlins and laid at anchor three months. We went ashore — got full pay — naturally it was one long binge. On an oil tanker, for instance, you get one night in port — not much time to cut loose — but this ship, the [Granada?] was a food ship, and she was laid up for repairs.

It was carnival time in New Awlins. Every street was one long brothel. Gosh, it's a funny feeling, wakin up in the morning, before you open your eyes, stretch out your arms and wonder which dame's layin alongside. The place smelt like a distillery. Strangers kept bringing in more strangers. Just like havin a pair of swinging doors. You chin with people you never met, but you're so soused you don't know em from you own mother. I don't know, those three months went by like one long night — no, [nightmare?]. Well, it was

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worth it. When we made ship again, it meant staying sober for six months — and that was one long hangover.

Old Pop Murray is a fella can tell you plenty about binges.

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He's spent a lifetime with going from one binge to another. Little bit of an old dried up fella — all the guys used to rib him because of his size. The moment we'd weigh anchor, even if it was for two hours, he'd hop off to a bar. Course, he'd get tight and miss the ship. Then he'd hop a bus to the next port, have an hour leeway to get aboard, got drunk over again, and miss the ship again. Then he'd have to hop a plane to catch her up. "But the same thing would happen over again. We'd be six months out, before he'd finally make the ship, and he'd be tight as a drum — enough to last him to his next leave. Old Pop Murray — he was a card — the champeen ship-misser of them all.

The most miserable eight days I ever spent was aboard a whaler off the coast of Nova Scotia. Those Nova Scotians have nerve — they called the ship the [Levithan?!] And it was more the size of a walnut shell. Crowded! Jeez, you had to open the cabin door to take your pants off. There wasn't room for the receiving set and the bunk both. My pillow was right across the receiver, and the tail of the mattress on the spark yap.

This ship was manned by a bunch of blue-noses — herring chockers — they're all fishing ships out that way — and those Nova Scotian fishermen are the only bastards who can stand the cold. They never take a bath — smell like whale blubber. Won't use a table while eating either — but reach right into the pot under the galley stove and eat with their paws.

First thing I remember that trip, two hours of the channel, I'm on the receiver, and I fet a whiff out of their corncob pipes — Five Brothers Tobacco — its rank. Everything smells of whale blubber, and tobacco and dead fish — and its so cold you darsent stick your nose

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on deck for air. Eight days was enough of that. I shipped on the [Mary B?], running down to Boston - back to civiliza-[?] 5 MANNY ARDIS

(Medium height, sturdy, dark hair, fresh complexion, about 23. Clipped, laconical speech, quick, restless gestures)

Naw, I don't pay much attention to the messages that come off the wires. Too busy. You get so's you go through the motions mechanical. Don't stop to read 'em — just transcribe the letters without seeing the words. Funny thing, you take a message — a minute later someone asks you what is it — you just put down the exact time on the form, but you have to look up at the clock to get the time.

Most of what comes in is from business houses, stock-brokers and so on. Some are in code, but not so much nowadays. Then there's social messages, congratulations — somebody had a baby or got married — or somebody got sick, or died. After that, all kinds. I hardly ever read any. Some of them might be a little out of the way. Like three four months ago, I remember a couple girls used to send messages back and forth — forget what state — and they happened to hit my machine — something like this — oh, I forget now — let's see — well, it could be,taken two different ways — one says something like “I forget where I laid her” — ore something. I don't know, could be taken up in two different ways...

Yeah, workin here gets on your nerves, the noise, and you gotta keep goin. Well, you got used to it. The leg men have it even tougher. Most young kids — they pick em between 16 and 21. Those kids all get thin on the job. Some of the operators been here years get fat from sitting....

Yeah, I make up these verses for a friend. He gives em to his girlfriend. On Valentines I sent one to my girlfriend. She thought it was alright. Any day as good as the patent ones[?] they have printed for holiday messages. Better, my opinion.

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I make em up after hours, and type em out on the machine. They just came to me — the rhymes come to me — I never have no trouble. Something to, keep your mind off your work — I do it for fun — relaxes me. I got another minute, then my relief's up — I gotta go — I'll be seein you... RUTH BLATT:

(Thin, nervous girl, about 30, reddish-blond hair, slightly squinting, rapidly blinking eyes. Talks hurriedly, running sentences together. Worked as operator 9 years.)

Gee, it's quite here compared to the floor. What a relief to get out of that noise. This lunch room probably seems noisy to you — but you should work on the floor for three hours — hundreds of machines rattling in your ears — this is like soft music to me. I eat a sandwich or something at each relief period. Chewing takes the numbness out of my ears. You'll see a lot of girls chewing gum — relieves the strain. Some of the girls have been here 15, 20 years. They develop bad ears and bad eyes. It's quite a strain. Things used to be worse than they are now, though. Before the union came in. We have a closed shop now. We have more freedom on the floor than we used to. The supers aren't breathing down our backs every minute. They would call a speed-up — we weren't even allowed to talk to each other on the floor. Now we talk, and sometimes write notes on the backs of the forms. There's not much time for gossip though.

About a year ago, we called a stand-up. Cleaned up things a little. Only 41 people in the whole outfit scabbed — five floors. We used the wires, and relayed the stand-up signal to the ACA at Dallas and Kansas City. Dallas and Kansas both went out at the same time. That was when our outfit joined the CIO.

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We had the thing all worked out. At 11 A.M. there was a whistle blown on every floor, and each worker stopped his machine and stood up. The wires were locked. Then we just went on as usual. No worker left the building. We appointed a squad to keep order. The T

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and R men (testing and regulating men) watched that no one tampered with equipment or touched any company property. We gave the workers their shorts and lunches as usual, and we had a grand time in the lunch room, dancing and singing, playing cards and one thing and another. The strike lasted three hours and twenty minutes. We got our closed shop, and better conditions.

We made up songs — we really had a good time — on company time! Gee, I wish I could remember some of the songs, well, one was to the tune of the Merry-go-round Broke Down— the first verse went something like this: Postel Tel said No They hadn't any dough When ARTA came And changed its game Oh hear those whistles blow We will make the old Postel pay For all the years that they had their way The CIO has won We got em on the run Postal Tel can go to hell The CIO has won

ARTA- American Radio Telegraph Association